
28 THE STATE OF SCIENTIFIC INFORMATION SYSTEMS IN BARBADOS

G Davis-Isaacs

It is necessary first of all to examine in depth the functions and role of the various Scientific Institutions existing in a country, before one can first determine the size, and scope of design of a system of the receipt and dissemination of scientific information.

It would appear that Barbados, like most developing countries, has inherited from its colonial days systems of one kind or another, which were originally designed to feed information into the receptacles of the metropolitan power which was at the time dominating the activities of the particular country.

On the other hand, developing and especially newly independent countries, such as Barbados, have found it necessary to institute new systems, set up new departments of Government, encourage and assist with establishment of institutions of varying kinds; all in an effort to determine for the country's own good, what is available to it and what maximum use they can be put to.

In this connection, the establishment of an institution like the Barbados National Standards Institute comes readily to mind. This Institution has emerged out of the necessity for some standard measure of control over the various products that were not being produced and manufactured in the country.

It is at this point that I will examine the scientific information system that is available in the country. If we take a first look at the manufacture of pepper-sauce as part of the over-all operation of an agroindustrial plant, the efficiency or inefficiencies of the existing information systems should become apparent.

The need might or rather will arise for information regarding the present and potential output of peppers by farmers; information will also be required as to what are present yields per hectare, as well as an indication as to if these present yields could be improved, and if so to what extent and in what length of time. This latter being most important as the industrialist, planning his operation, or for an expansion of his operation, will of necessity require reliable answers to these questions, which are only a few of myriads that would need to be answered.

These few should suffice for the purpose of this exercise.

Let us examine first of all, the availability of the information. The first approach will be made to the Ministry of Agriculture - a rather large institution, comprising several departments and divisions each employing several scores of people. Where or to whom should the request for this information be directed?

Several courses of action are available to the receptionist. They may refer enquirer to any one of the following sections or persons:

- The Chief Agricultural Officer
- One of the Deputy Chief Agricultural Officers
- The Library
- The Agricultural Information Unit
- The Economic Planning Unit
- One of the Research Agronomists.

It should be noted here that only those that are most likely to have the answers required have been included in this list. There is the other side to this problem, and that is the difficulty the receptionist may have in determining where to send the request and might end up referring the enquirer to an administrative office.

This latter statement is not made lightly, but rather emphasises the lack of a central information collecting centre for scientific operation even within a small institution such as the Ministry of Agriculture, one segment of the government operations. The other point that could be made here, is that it is more than likely that the enquirer would not be able to obtain an answer from any, or a combination of the persons or sections listed above.

This last statement does not imply that the information is not available. As a matter of fact, with reference to the particular case - peppers, and the possibilities therefore - there is abundant documented material in the form of research reports which have been made over the years.

But the major question still arises - where are they? What is the system used for collecting, collating, storing, distributing, etc. of such data? The answer is not a simple one.

Let us first have a look at the agencies which have activities of a scientific nature. They are:

- The University of the West Indies
- The Caribbean Development Bank
- The Ministry of Agriculture
- The Public Library
- The Caribbean Agricultural Research and Development Institute

Now time and space does not permit a detailed examination of functions of these various institutions, or their contributions to scientific knowledge; suffice it to say that either individually or collectively, there is and I emphasise there

is, the information required by the entrepreneur who made the request concerning the peppers.

What may be of more than passing interest is the methods used by these various institutions for the processing, this word used in its widest sense, of the scientific information acquired by them either by their own research or from reports of other agencies fed into them for analysis, their own use or to supplement other work being done by other agencies.

It may be appropriate at this time to have a look at the organisation with which I am more familiar - The Ministry of Agriculture. Scientific information may be supplied either by research or extension staff. This would normally be done by way of the report system, either periodically, annually, or as the occasion necessitates. Usually, these reports would be directed to the Chief Agricultural Officer through the appropriate deputy. Dependent on the nature of the information contained in the report, copies may be channelled to some or all of the following agencies:

1. The "File"
2. The Ministry's Library
3. The Public Library
4. Farmers' Organisations
5. The Institutions referred to in a previous paragraph

What does not happen is the opposite to this out-flow of information that is, there is no steady or sustained inflow of scientific information into the Ministry, and further, even where there is an inflow there is no charted course for the analysis and storage of this information as it becomes available. I would venture to say that this applies similarly to several other agencies for scientific knowledge.

This leads to the conclusion therefore that there is a dire need for the examination of the scientific information systems as they now exist, with a view to making them effective and possibly productive. To summarize:

1. There is a wealth of scientific information on a variety of subjects available in Barbados;
2. There are several agencies which obtain, produce, collect and channel scientific information to other agencies or the public;
3. There is no co-ordinated effort between the various institutions to centralise and codify the available information;
4. There is a need for the establishment of a unified system of report;
5. On failing (4), an established system of interchange reports; and
6. There is need for a central pool to which all scientific information should be directed.